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ITALIAN COMMUNIST POLITICAL STRATEGY

Summary

Italian Communist chief Berlinguer apparently has resisted intense pressure from his party's left wing to abandon the "historic compromise" strategy. On the surface, this stance appears ambiguous because in order to placate his internal opponents, Berlinguer has pledged to give greater emphasis to Communist relations with the Socialists. This in turn has raised questions in some quarters about which party--the Socialists or Christian Democrats--the Communists will now view as their principal interlocutor on the question of greater Communist involvement in the governing process.

Our best guess is that Berlinguer may have acquiesced in his opponents' demand not only because he needs to protect his position within the party but also because he sees a conciliatory stance toward the Socialists as the most promising tactic to woo them away from their governmental alliance with the Christian Democrats. Berlinguer may hope eventually to co-opt or neutralize the Socialists and--by depriving the Christian Democrats of any other alternative--ultimately revive the question of direct Communist participation in a future coalition government.

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The recent internal debate over the party's "historic compromise" strategy--with its emphasis on a preferential relationship with the Christian Democrats--has been prompted by a growing body of evidence that Communist momentum toward a direct governing role is stalled. This perception stems in part from the party's mediocre performance in last month's local elections. The Communist vote totals dropped nearly three percent compared to the last running of these elections in 1975. The party did come close to holding its own in relation to its performance in last year's parliamentary vote, but overall the image of the Communists as a dynamic political force has faded. [REDACTED]

The party's problems were compounded by the Socialists' decision to participate in the Cossiga government. During the "crisis" which existed earlier when the Socialists rejected an alliance with the Christian Democrats, the Communists could--with some effect--pressure the Christian Democrats to consider the possibility of Communist cabinet ministers. Now, in a certain sense, the question of Communist participation in the government has become problematic, despite the party's continuing and impressive influence in parliament and Italian society as a whole [REDACTED]

Discontent with party strategy emerged clearly during the party's Central Committee meeting late last month. In that meeting, leftwing Communists argued for the replacement of the "historic compromise" with the "unity of the left" strategy in which the party would strive toward a governmental alliance with the Socialists and other leftist forces. Berlinguer's response to this challenge exemplified the Communist leader's flexibility in dealing with controversial issues and his ability to turn a potentially difficult situation to his advantage. He allowed his opponents to vent their feelings, while at the same time co-opting their call for improving the party's relations with the Socialists and adapting it to his own purposes. This move represents a tactical adjustment in his existing "historic compromise" policy necessitated by his perception of several new realities of Italian politics:

- that the election results seem to confirm the Communists' relatively weakened position vis a vis the Christian Democrats.
- that the new Christian Democratic leadership appears for the time being in the hands of the party's anti-Communist majority.
- that in order to avoid the plight of the French Communists--whom Berlinguer sees as being isolated and ineffective--Italian Communists must improve their ties with the Socialists. [REDACTED]

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Berlinguer's moves indicate a tacit acknowledgement of the Socialists' pivotal role in Italian politics--reconfirmed by their impressive showing in last month's elections--and are aimed ultimately at re-enlisting them in the campaign to include the Communists in a future government. In practical terms the Communists are working both to disengage the Socialists from the Christian Democrats at the national level and are determined to maintain as much leverage as possible over the Socialists by strengthening and extending "leftist coalitions" in local administrations. [REDACTED]

At the same time, Berlinguer seems doubtful that a relationship with the Socialists could ever replace one with the Christian Democrats--still the single strongest force in Italian politics. Moreover, there apparently is substantial opposition--within both the Communist and Socialist parties--to the "leftist alternative." Berlinguer reportedly is convinced that the major obstacle at present to the "unity of the left" is Socialist chief Craxi--currently riding high as a result of the Socialists' electoral gains--and undoubtedly hopes to undercut his strength by courting the Socialist left. [REDACTED]

For these reasons, Berlinguer has refused to budge, even in the face of leftwing Communist pressure, from his commitment to an Italian government in which all "progressive" forces--including Communists, socialists and catholics--participate. He reportedly intends to continue cultivating the Christian Democratic left wing. Berlinguer is aware, however, that any open conciliatory gestures at this point toward the Christian Democrats are likely to stir up considerable opposition from the Communist left. He apparently hopes to head off such a reaction by simultaneously mounting a hardline opposition to the Cossiga government--particularly to its economic policies. Berlinguer bears no personal grudge toward Cossiga but seems determined to bring down the government out of the conviction that the longer the coalition remains in office, the more difficult it will become to replace it with one more open to the Communists. [REDACTED]

The Communists' tough line toward Cossiga and company almost certainly aims at creating the impression that effective government is impossible without their assistance. They undoubtedly also hope to spur likeminded Christian Democrats and Socialists to use the opportunity to capture control of their respective parties and prepare the way for an eventual deal of some sort. Inevitably, however, these tactics have the effect of heightening the anti-Communist sentiments of the current Christian Democratic and Socialist leaders, thereby further isolating the party in its opposition role for the time being. [REDACTED]

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The Communists seem under no illusions that this new policy will yield immediate results. In fact, the party seems prepared to continue sniping at the government from the sidelines for some time, perhaps as long as four years--the remaining term of the current legislature--if necessary. [redacted]

[redacted] On the one hand, by continuing their stiff opposition to governmental policies, the Communists risk becoming political pariahs, particularly if the new center-left coalition is able to govern effectively. This could prompt another round of vitriolic internal attacks on Berlinguer's leadership and policies of the sort that followed the 1979 parliamentary elections. On the other hand, if ineffective government continues to be the rule during this period, the Communists are likely to be rewarded by the electorate for their opposition and enabled to reopen the question of their participation in the government. [redacted]

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